

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Dreaming in the 21st Century: Setting the Stage

Larry Brooks · Wednesday, May 6th, 2020

Dr. Larry Brooks was killed after being struck by a car on May 5, 2020, while walking near his home in Los Angeles's Arts District. Larry contributed several articles to Cultural Weekly describing his signature work in Social Dreaming. We are returning these articles to our home page each week to celebrate Larry and his vision. This article was first published on August 26, 2015.

Imagine the following... You are standing on the shores of consciousness. There is a bridge that extends from morning to the end of cosmic night and from consciousness to the bottomless depths of unconsciousness. You begin the trek on this bridge, this royal road. You notice Freud and Jung, as well as others. There are few road signs. Those that can be detected are misleading. You inevitably reach a mysterious gap, as if the bridge suddenly ended and you were left only to imagine....

Dreams shroud the waking world, dazzling and disturbing it with mystery, perplexity, novelty, anxiety, terror, hope, and possibility. Anthony Blake, an English intellectual, has described dreams "as something unbidden that come out of darkness with an intelligence beyond our waking intelligence to grasp." The mystery of the dream is suggestive of an otherworldly interface between the sleeping and waking self and the world, an indeterminate interface that holds unrealized potential.

Dreams have been part of our history as a species. Before the word was the dream. Within certain early cultures, dreams occupied a central role in the society. In indigenous cultures dreams were told to shamans and were used to guide important decisions as well as critical to healing. In Greece and Egypt dream temples were constructed as centers of religion and healing. Kilton Stewart, anthropologist and psychotherapist, in the 1930's studied the Senoi, a Malayan aborigine tribe, whose happiness and well-being were linked to their morning custom of family dream-telling where members of the family would tell and discuss their dreams.

Western, industrial culture had its brief but significant encounter with the dream. One can say that Psychoanalysis was born from the dream. Freud's seminal work that launched psychoanalysis in 1900, *The Interpretation of Dreams* was based on his interpretation of his dreams. It not only articulated a framework for understanding dreams, but also contained his earliest theories of mental functioning. Psychological culture as we know it emerged from this unconscious portal.

Dreams have also been the source of scientific discovery, creative work, and healing in our culture. Deirdre Barrett, Ph.D. in her book *The Committee of Sleep: How Artists, Scientists, and Athletes*

Use Dreams for Creative Problem-Solving– and How You Can Too documents this history with many examples. Kekule, the German chemist discovered the ring structure of Benzene in a dream. He dreamt of atoms dancing around that linked together to form snakes. One of the snakes reached around and took its tail in its mouth. When Kekule awakened, he realized that benzene was a ring formation. Mary Shelley’s idea for her novel *Frankenstein: Or The Modern Prometheus* came from a dream. Authors such as Yeats and Stephen King, as well as a host of others used dreams as a source for their writings.

This enduring mental phenomenon that had been integral to many indigenous cultures as well as to the growth of our contemporary psychological consciousness, now exists on the margins of our technologically dominated culture. Even psychoanalysis has abandoned the dream. According to Paul Lippman, a contemporary psychoanalyst, “psychoanalysis was not up to the dream’s openness, puzzling variety, creativity, and zaniness... That is, psychoanalysis shied away from a genuine encounter with dreams, instead shaping dreams to fit its version of the unconscious.”

He attributes this phenomenon to theoretical, economic and cultural factors. Theoretical changes, reflected in Ego Psychology’s interest in mental structure and Attachment Theory’s interest in developmental patterns of attachment, have shifted attention away from the unconscious. Economic factors have led to a decrease in the frequency of weekly visits and an increasing focus on coping. Beyond this, Lippman asserts that the technological world lures us away from inner experience as we outsource all too willingly many of our psychological functions to gadgets and their apps.

The presence of dreaming creates an intrinsic epistemological puzzle and personal challenge.

“The dream is always enlarging the space of the possible. Through the dream we are brought into tension between the finite (that which we know) and the infinite (that which is beyond our ken.)” — **G.W. Lawrence**, *Experiences in Social Dreaming*

On a nightly basis sleep introduces us to an other-worldliness that we are intimately connected to (that we have mysteriously created) and yet seem estranged from.

What is lost by our growing indifference to dreams? What is their place in our contemporary culture? If historical approaches to dream-work such as psychoanalysis have failed to understand the dream in its complexities, then how do we optimally approach dreams? In essays that follow I will examine the value that dreams hold for our culture and present two ways of understanding and working with dreams: Dream Tending and Social Dreaming.

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